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REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Telling Embarrassment

On Friday in Rome, Christian Roulette was laughed out of court; he was to have been a star witness for the Bulgarians on trial for conspiring to shoot the pope. Instead, the Communist disinformation network was caught, shall we say, red-handed.

The fundamentals of the story were spelled out by our Gordon Crovitz last Wednesday. Mr. Roulette is author of "La Filiere" or "The Connection," a book that suggests the CIA got Agca to shoot John Paul II. In recent weeks he was quoted by the Bulgarian press agency as saying that he had received files proving Agca was coached to blame the Bulgarians. These files were said to have come from Francesco Pazienza, a former Italian military secret service agent jailed in New York while fighting extradition on bank fraud charges stemming from the collapse of Banco Ambrosiano. Interviewed in New York, Mr. Pazienza said no such files existed. And reached at an unlisted suburban Paris number supplied by the Bulgarian Embassy in Washington, Mr. Roulette admitted he had not actually seen any files.

This drama played itself out in Judge Severino Santiapichi's courtroom. Mr. Roulette had requested to testify, writing a letter talking of files belonging to Mr. Pazienza. By the time of his appearance Friday, The Wall Street Journal/Europe had printed the Crovitz story, which was then reported in the Friday editions of the important Rome daily Corriere Della Sera. Judge Santiapichi, it developed, was well prepared.

The judge first asked what Mr. Roulette was doing in his courtroom. Mr. Roulette began to mention "files," at which point Judge Santiapichi asked what files. Mr. Roulette said he hadn't actually seen any files. Well, the judge asked, what had he seen? He said he had a letter from Mr. Pazienza.

Judge Santiapichi then held up a copy of Mr. Pazienza's letter and asked a startled Mr. Roulette if this

was the letter he meant. Yes, it was. Judge Santiapichi then informed the court and Mr. Roulette that there was no reference to any files that would clear the Bulgarians or any files in any Paris bank vault.

Mr. Roulette was then asked why Mr. Pazienza had written him. He refused to answer. The judge threatened to have Mr. Roulette arrested for "reticence." He relented and said that a client of his, Luigi Cavallo, had written to Mr. Pazienza asking about the pope plot and that he'd passed the letter on to Mr. Roulette. At the mention of Luigi Cavallo, the court press reporters began hooting. Mr. Cavallo is a renowned propagandist and accused blackmailer who is in a French jail awaiting extradition to Italy. He is also a former Communist leader and the editor of a newsletter that has blamed the CIA for the pope shooting.

It's rare to uncover so blatant an effort at disinformation. Either Mr. Roulette said he'd seen files that don't exist or the Sofia Press Agency chose to report that he had seen such files. Whichever, the ploy managed to attract articles in important Italian and American newspapers. The trick of disinformation, of course, is to get credible sources to print lies that they believe to be true. We did not notice Mr. Roulette's embarrassment reported over the weekend on this side of the Atlantic, which is regrettable, since Western journalists have a clear interest in untangling disinformation when it occurs.

More broadly, it's instructive to ask why disinformation is flying so furiously over the pope plot trial. While Agca has in the end stuck by his charges that the Bulgarians assisted and directed him in the shooting, his bizarre testimony clearly hinders a courtroom conviction. But for the Bulgarians and their Soviet sponsors, the nagging question has been, who had a motive to kill the pope?

The Soviets clearly resented the elevation of a Polish pope just when

they were faced with Solidarity and general resistance in Poland; for them he was a clear problem. No one any longer believes Agca acted alone out of some anti-Christian fervor. The disinformation effort has been pointed at creating some other motive out of the murky scandal involving the P2 lodge, Banco Ambrosiano and Western intelligence. But in this effort the disinformation experts had little to work with, and had to invent the far-fetched tale that exploded in Judge Santiapichi's court Friday.

Whatever the courtroom verdict, this outcome should be kept in mind by anyone trying to discern what happened in the pope plot. For with the collapse of the effort to concoct a plot involving Western scandals, we are left where we began. No one had a motive except the Soviets.